



Garavan, Thomas, Wang, Jia, Matthews-Smith, Gerri, Nagarathnam, Bharrani and Lai, Yanqing ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9107-3464> (2018) Advancing national human resource development research: suggestions for multilevel investigations. Human Resource Development International, 21 (4). pp. 288-318. ISSN 1367-8868

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Version: Accepted Version

Publisher: Taylor & Francis

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13678868.2018.1429171>

Please cite the published version

Advancing national human resource development research: suggestions for multilevel investigations

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ABSTRACT

National human resource development (NHRD) is now an important area of investigation within human resource development with significant growth in publications over 49 years. Scholars have, however, highlighted the need for multilevel approaches to NHRD. We reviewed 192 papers to identify gaps on multilevel theorizing, and we propose a multilevel framework incorporating macro, meso, and micro levels of analysis. We develop principles and guidelines around WHAT, HOW, WHERE, WHEN, and WHY questions to promote multilevel NHRD research. Finally, we discuss research and methodological implications of our review.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 5 October 2017
Accepted 15 January 2018

KEYWORDS

NHRD; systematic review; multilevel framework; principles and guidelines

1. Introduction

In the global economy of the twenty-first century, Thite (2015) argues persuasively that the management and development of people will remain key to competitive advantage for both organizations and countries. In this regard, the field of national human resource development (NHRD) has received considerable attention from academics, policymakers, and practitioners (McLean 2006; Wang and Swanson 2008; Alagaraja and Githens 2016). The field has advanced along a number of lines of inquiry. The first concerns country NHRD systems, which deals with understanding the kinds of NHRD policies and practices within a given country. The second concerns the interplay between HRD and global sustainability and development issues and deals with how NHRD can be used by global and national bodies and agencies such as the United Nations Development Programme, the Commonwealth Secretariat, UNESCO, and the World Bank to address issues such as poverty, world hunger, and health issues. The third but as yet emerging strand concerns the adoption and implementation of HRD to address community issues and target specific populations. Across these various lines of inquiry, a number of themes are in evidence. First, NHRD is concerned with the implementation of large-scale systemic policymaking initiatives that benefit multiple stakeholders (Rana, Ardichirlli, and Zaing 2017; Oh et al. 2017; Oh, Ryu, and Choi 2013). Second, NHRD contributes to both economic and social development (Cho and McLean 2004; Alagaraja and Githens 2016) and adopts a multiple beneficiaries

approach. Third, NHRD is contextual and embedded within complex institutional and social structures.

The majority of this research has adopted western-based theories and models to investigate the phenomenon of NHRD in both western and non-western countries such as the UK, the USA, China, India, and Brazil. In addition, theorizing and empirical investigations have mainly focused on one level of analysis and adopted top-down rather than emergence-based perspectives. Scholars, therefore, have called for the need to investigate NHRD at multiple levels and within that context to develop alternative models that can recognize and incorporate unique contextual elements in exploring NHRD in emerging economies and areas of significant underdevelopment (Alagaraja and Wang 2012; McLean 2012). Responding to these calls, NHRD scholars have started to devise new approaches to investigate different contexts and to give greater consideration to the use of multilevel approaches. For example, Alagaraja and Githens (2016) propose an integrative framework that considers capacity building at national, organizational, and individual levels and focuses on financial, industrial, and workforce capacities. Anikin (2017) undertook a multilevel analysis of the role of occupational structures and its impact on access to HRD and found that the incidence of HRD was highly contextualized within the structure of occupations and the inequalities within them.

In this article, we systematically analyse 192 articles published in 23 journals during the period from 1958 to 2017. In doing so, we identify three main limitations with the existing literature. First, the majority of the research does not explicitly or implicitly adopt a multilevel perspective and those studies that do focus on top-down rather than on bottom-up or emergence-based approaches. Second, in terms of patterns of theory, methodology, data, and content within the extant literature, the content areas have both broadened and deepened its coverage of NHRD issues. However, it would still benefit from the use of theoretical perspectives and research designs that explain and capture multilevel phenomena. Additionally, there is a bias towards the investigation of particular issues at different levels of analysis and an overemphasis on the investigation of particular levels. The macro level of analysis in particular is underresearched with significant less attention to the investigation of formal and informal institutional factors, culture, environmental, and global influence on NHRD. The meso or intermediate level receives considerable more attention with detailed consideration of national policymakers, legislative bodies, and NHRD policies. We found a significant number of studies that have investigated the micro level and focused on researching NHRD implementation actors, the implementation of specific NHRD strategies, and the investigation of micro-level NHRD outcomes. What is missing are studies that focus on all three levels of analysis simultaneously.

In the remainder of this article, we start by outlining the evolution of the NHRD concept. We then describe our systematic review methodology and methods for identifying, selecting, and reviewing relevant publications. Subsequently, we summarize our findings about the current status of NHRD research using a multilevel informed framework and present guidelines for future research. In the final section, we discuss the implications of our framework for NHRD research and the methodological implications that arise from the principles that we propose.

2. The evolution of NHRD as a research area

Central to the concept of NHRD is the idea that investment in human capital enhances country economic, social, and civic development. Harbison and Myers (1964) argued that ‘people are the real wealth of a nation’ (p.15) and Briggs (1987) further argued that, ‘if human resources are truly “the wealth of nations,” their development carries with it the parallel responsibilities to recognize that their contribution to the economy must enhance the quality of life on this planet and not lead to its enslavement, impoverishment, or extinction’ (p. 1236). Human capital theory Becker (1964) provides a strong economic rationale for countries to implement NHRD policies and programmes where training and development investments enhance the human capital of the nation and contribute to sustained competitiveness. Meanwhile, NHRD also plays a major role in the alleviation of poverty in emerging and underdeveloped countries (Baek and Kim 2014; Kim, Lee, and Jung 2009). For example, the Afghanistan National Development Strategy Prioritization and Implementation Plan emphasizes that ‘human resources are the backbone of a nation’s economy, reflecting national capacity to supply needed skills for economic growth and productivity. Without a strong, equitable, and appropriate approach to human resource development, sustainable economic growth remains elusive’ (p.32). Evidence demonstrates that investment in education and training by countries will alleviate poverty and contribute to economic growth in developing country contexts (Mahmud et al. 2014; Psacharopoulos and Patrinos 2004). Such investment also has value in high-growth countries and is key to sustained competitiveness. Osman-Gani and Tan (2000) and Osman-Gani (2004), for example, have highlighted the importance of investment in NHRD to the growth of Singapore. NHRD can also help countries and individuals cope with recession and global downturn (Panagiotakopoulos 2015; Storberg-Walker 2012).

It is, therefore, not surprising that there is major growth in NHRD publications in the past five years. The data reveal that the number of journal articles published annually on NHRD has increased significantly in recent years, signifying growing interest in the topic (see Figure 1). Around 80% of the articles were published in HRD and training and development journals. The remainder appeared in economics, Human Resource Management (HRM), and other social science journals. Very few articles have been published in general management, international business, strategy,

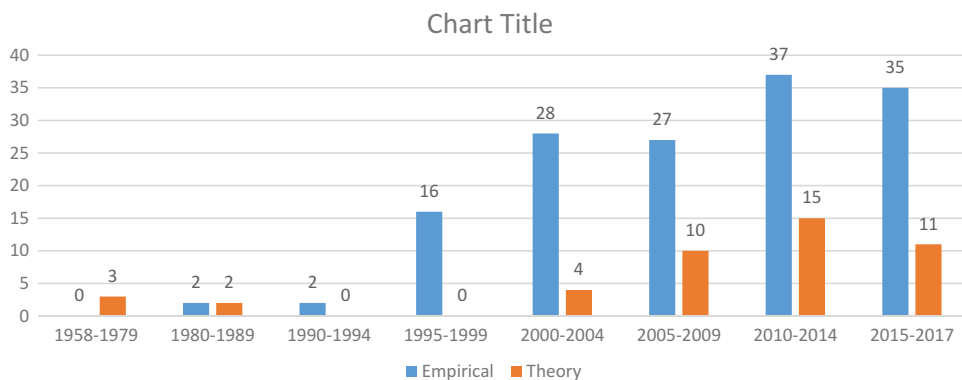


Figure 1. Publication timeline.

organizational behaviour, and organizational studies journals, indicating that research on NHRD is scarce in these fields. Four hundred and ten scholars authored the NHRD papers, and seven authors are responsible for three or more publications.

The most prominent publication outlets include the *European Journal of Training and Development* (51 papers), *International Journal of Training and Development* (47 papers), *Advances in Developing Human Resources* (28 papers), *Human Resource Development International* (28 papers), *International Labour Review* (7 papers), and *Human Resource Development Review* (13 papers). Papers have also been published in journals in areas such as education, vocational education, economics, and management. Forty-nine papers were categorized as conceptual and 136 were empirical.

3. Method

3.1. Selection of journals and coding

Using the systematic review method proposed by Tranfield, Denyer, and Smart (2003), the first fourth and fifth authors searched the electronic databases including Social Science Citation Index, Business Source Premier, Scopus, Science Direct, Google Scholar, Sage Full Text Collection, Econ Lit (PROQUEST), and Wilson Business Full Text. The combinations of the following key words guided the search: ‘National Human Resource Development’, ‘National Human Development Policy and Planning’, ‘National training systems’, ‘National Human Capital Development’, ‘Societal HRD’, and ‘Training and development at national level’. The goal was to identify empirical and theoretical articles published in academic journals up to December 2017 in the English language. We also located studies through cross-referencing, recommendations from experts, and hand-searches of individual journals. We made the decision only to include articles published or in early view in peer-reviewed journals. Peer-reviewed articles are authoritative indicators of the quality of the field (Aykol, Palihawadana, and Leonidou 2013). We made the decision not to include editorials, articles that consisted of extended interviews with leading authors within the field, chapters in edited books, conference papers, and theses when mapping the research field. We made these exclusion decisions based on approaches taken in systematic reviews published in high-ranking journals (e.g. Tenzer, Terjesen, and Harzing 2017). However, we did use these additional sources to supplement the analysis presented in the Findings section. These searches led to a variety of publications in a relatively narrow set of journals. Our review starts in 1958 with the earliest publications we identified and ends in December 2017 spanning almost five decades. We initially identified 1570 publications of which 190 met the criteria for inclusion. To identify articles, appropriate for inclusion, we reviewed the title and abstract of all articles and excluded articles that did not explicitly address NHRD. When in doubt, we read the entire article to determine whether it should be included in our review. All of the articles included in the review are marked with an * on the full set of references. We jointly coded the first 20 papers; however, we observed a very high level of inter-coder agreement, so we proceeded to code independently the remaining papers with frequent cross-checking. We experienced significant attrition in publications from our initial list to the final sample of papers. However, this is common with systematic review. For example, Nolan and Garavan (2016) included a list of 125 final articles derived from an initial list of

2348 articles, and Phelps et al. (2012) reduced an initial list of 3500 articles to 107 for the final review.

3.2. Identification of multilevel themes and sub-themes

We adopted a multilevel analysis approach consistent with the primary focus of the review. To define these levels, we examined previous literature to identify the appropriate levels of analysis as well as using the outputs of our coding process. We follow ideas proposed by Budhwar, Varma, and Patel (2016) and Baum, Kralj, Robinson and Solnet (2016) to formulate our framework. We utilized a macro-, meso-, and micro-level categorization, which is widely used in the literature. Both empirical and conceptual contributions highlighted a variety of factors at each level of analysis. Papers researching or discussing macro-level factors drew on institutional arguments and cross-cultural concepts to understand NHRD. These include: cross-cultural differences (Ariss and Sidani 2016), important international institutions such as trading blocs, humanitarian organizations and global National Governmental Organisations (NGOs) (Guo and Al Ariss 2015), global labour mobility talent flows (Cooke, Saini, and Wang 2014), mass migration (Ariss and Sidani 2016), global economic trends (Vaiman, Scullion, and Collings, 2012), and global training and development standards (Murphy and Garavan 2009).

Articles examining meso-level factors explored country-level characteristics that impact the formulation and implementation of NHRD. Examples of meso-level factors influencing NHRD that we identified include national culture (Hofstede 1991), critical local and national institutions that influence NHRD policy formulation coordination and control (Ashton 2002), legislation and standards relevant to NHRD (Budhwar, Al-Yahmadi, and Debrah 2002; Cox, Al Arkoubi, and Estrada 2006), national stakeholders including NGOs, trade unions (Mulder and Tjepkema 1999; Lucio and Stuart 2003), employer bodies (Elkin 1998; Lee 2004), sector-specific characteristics and level of economic development (Budhwar, Al-Yahmadi, and Debrah 2002; Mellahi 2000), national labour market characteristics (Lynham and Cunningham 2004; Ke et al. 2006), and education and training institutions (Ahn and Mclean 2006; Cunningham, Lynham, and Weatherly 2006).

In contrast to both the macro and meso levels of analysis, papers examining the micro level explored the processes involved in implementing NHRD. These factors generally focused on NHRD-specific actors (Akanji and Bankole, 2007; Alagaraja and Wang 2012; Heraty and Collings 2006), NHRD-specific implementation bodies (Arthur-Mensah and Alagaraja 2013; Asrar-ul-Haq 2015; Elkin 1998), NHRD actors' perceptions and behaviours (Paprock, Yumol, and Atienza 2006; Rao 2004; Wilkins 2001), and social resources and capital of NHRD actors (Ahn and Mclean 2006; Nery-Kjerfve et al. 2014; Osman-Gani and Tan 2000).

In totality, articles point to an interrelated set of macro-, meso-, and micro-level influences shaping NHRD. Reviewing macro-level papers, we can see that NHRD is influenced by higher-order institutional factors consisting of regulative, normative, and cognitive dimensions. Economic and cultural-cognitive elements of institutions form a global context that both facilitate and inhibit NHRD. In addition, the review highlights key international and global actors that shape the role and form of NHRD. Meso-level factors shift the focus to the

country-level context and highlight that different countries, depending on their characteristics, will have unique challenges and approaches to NHRD. Micro-level contributions draw attention towards the processes of implementation and the roles of key national, regional, and local actors. NHRD at this level is influenced by resource issues, the motivations and roles of NHRD actors, and a range of organizations with responsibility for NHRD implementation. We also found that in some cases the papers addressed all three levels of analysis and in other cases there were significant overlaps between the meso and micro levels. This occurred where, for example, micro-level actors lobby meso-level institutions to achieve more resources for NHRD implementation. In addition, meso-level institutions set rules, develop frameworks, formulate policies, and generate the political commitment to support NHRD. At the micro level, the same or different bodies and actors have responsibility for NHRD implementation. Actors at the micro level will interact in various ways with the meso-level institutions and bodies and vice versa. [Figure 2](#) maps these factors as they apply to NHRD.

3.3. Analysis of other paper features

We also reviewed the papers to identify the following features relevant to the principles that we propose in the next section of the paper. We specifically coded the papers for (a) the methods of data collection used, (b) the sources of data on NHRD phenomena, (c) the timescale of studies, (d) study locations, and (e) the use of theory to guide both conceptual and empirical investigations.

4. An analytical framework and an agenda for future research

In this review, we have identified three levels of analysis in respect of research on NHRD. First, researchers have sought to specify the issues that should be considered at each level. Second, they have in some cases explored multiple levels of analysis and how different levels relate to each other. Third, a particularly large number of researchers have focused primarily on one level of analysis in an attempt to understand in depth the issues operating at that level and how factors at a particular level of analysis interact with each other. We also discovered critical knowledge gaps. We know relatively little about the linkages between macro-, meso-, and micro-level factors and how these operate in concert within specific country contexts. We found that there is relatively limited investigation of macro-level factors compared to other levels, and at a general level, research remains confined to particular disciplines.

Based on these general insights, we have developed a five-point analytical framework for understanding NHRD research from a multilevel perspective. Our framework outlines five principles that researchers need to attend to advance the field. Next, we elaborate on each principle in the framework and summarize in each case the key issues that emerged from the review, followed by a research agenda that highlights issues to be considered when researching NHRD from a multilevel perspective, as well as new insights that can be generated by drawing on alternative theoretical foundations and employing new research designs. We show in particular how contributions from different disciplines such as sociology, politics, law, anthropology, and economics can enrich our understanding of NHRD.

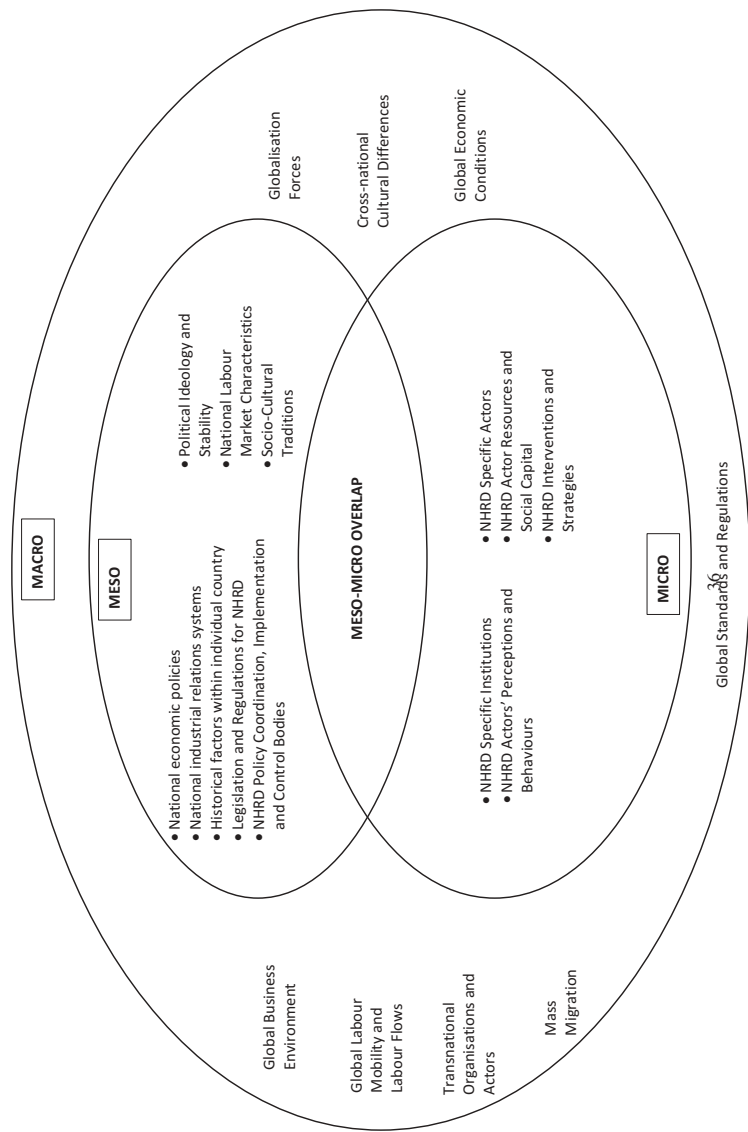


Figure 2. A multilevel framework for NHRD research.

4.1. The WHAT of multilevel NHRD

The first component of our framework concerns the levels at which researchers have investigated NHRD and the specific sub-themes that they have examined. We call this the WHAT principle. Previous works by McLean (2012) and Alagaraja and Wang (2012) have engaged with some of these ideas; however, we use the findings of our systematic review to indicate their prominence within the literature.

4.1.1. Key findings on the WHAT principle

In the NHRD papers reviewed, the preponderance of topics was located at the meso level (43%), followed by the micro level (32%) and the macro level (25%). Papers primarily theorized or investigated at one (47%) or two levels (micro and meso 21%; macro and meso 18%; and macro and micro 14%) or at all three levels (6%). Studies capturing the three levels include investigations of labour immigration (Tynaliyev and McLean 2011), economic growth and competitiveness (Osman-Gani and Liang-Tan 1998), social development (Kim 2012a), and world health issues such as HIV and AIDS (Johnson et al. 2010; Johnson and Bartlett 2013). A more recent study (Anikin 2017) captured multiple levels by investigating occupational propensity for training within a societal and occupational structure context and considering labour market characteristics and job characteristics.

Table 1 reveals that the most frequently examined topics within each level vary considerably in terms of frequency. Research at the macro level addressed issues relate to labour quality and mobility (69), global talent flows (64), global economic conditions (45), international institutions and actors (42), trading blocs (22), forces of globalization (30), mass labour migration (29), global standards and regulations (20), and cross-cultural differences (68). This set of topics was primarily examined in terms of their impact on NHRD challenges, opportunities, and strategies. They were sometimes used to frame cross-country analysis. Research at the meso-level explored a broad range of topics including labour market characteristics (121), national cultural characteristics and variation (64), migration policies and processes (47), taxation policies for training in NHRD (24), national historical legacy and influences (62), stages of country economic development (82), characteristics of the industrial relations system (24), country social resources and networks [40], business models and characteristics [56], national security and physical risk (22), and political ideology and attitudes (68). These topics were primarily investigated in the context of country studies and the NHRD policy formulation process. Research at the micro level mainly focused on actor characteristics and roles in addition to regional and local initiatives. The topics examined included national implementation actors' roles (99); relationships between implementation actors (98); NHRD policy implementation bodies (61); NHRD actor behaviours, perceptions, and motivations (72); implementation actors' networks and social capital (68); NHRD local rules and regulations (44); and NHRD evaluation processes and activities (57).

4.1.2. Directions and guidelines related to the WHAT principle

Overall, in terms of the WHAT, there is the disproportionate focus on the meso level and to a lesser extent on the micro level. The key challenges for researchers are twofold. First, they need to formulate researcher questions that require cross-level investigation and analysis.

Table 1. Summary of levels, themes, topics, and frequency of topics.

Level	Theme/topic	Frequency of topics	Topic as % of total topics within each level
Macro	• International labour quality and mobility	69	18
	• Global talent flows	64	16
	• Global economic conditions	45	12
	• International institutions and actors	42	11
	• Trading blocs	22	6
	• Forces of globalization	30	7.7
	• Mass labour migration	29	7.3
	• Global standards and regulations	20	5
	• Cross-cultural differences	68	17
	Total sub-themes for macro	389/25%	
Meso	• Labour market characteristics	121	18
	• National cultural characteristics and variation	64	10
	• Migration policies and processes	47	7
	• Taxation policies for training and NHRD	24	4.5
	• National historical legacy and influences	62	9
	• Stages of country economic development	82	12
	• Political ideology and attitudes	68	11
	• National informal institutions and rules	47	7
	• Industrial relations system characteristics	24	4
	• Business models and characteristics	56	9
	• Country social resources and networks	40	6
	• National security and physical risk	22	3.5
	Total sub-themes for meso	657/43%	
Micro	• NHRD implementation actor roles	99	19.8
	• Relationships between implementation actors	98	19.7
	• NHRD evaluation processes and activities	57	11
	• NHRD policy implementation bodies	61	12
	• NHRD actors' behaviours perceptions and motivations	72	14.5
	• Implementation actors' networks and social capital	68	14
	• NHRD local rules and regulations	44	9
	Total sub-themes for micro	499/32%	

Second, they need to focus more on the investigation of bottom-up processes and how the micro-level impact meso- and macro-level factors. Such an emergence-based approach would significantly enhance the field. There is, therefore, scope for researchers to design investigations that, for example, focus on the role of macro-level factors and their top-down influence on meso and micro levels. Indicative questions that remain underresearched

Table 2. Outcomes of SLR: key themes, analyses, gaps, and future research requirements.

Key issue	Definition	Key gaps	Future research opportunities
WHAT principle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What levels of analysis are investigated in NHRD research? • What content issues are investigated at each level of analysis? • What is the extent of cross-level analysis? • To what extent are multilevel investigations top-down or bottom-up? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nascent research linking the macro level to meso and/or micro levels. • Few researchers conduct all the three levels of analysis in one study • The literature primarily theorizes NHRD as a top-down 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct multilevel investigations with clearly defined constructs at each level of analysis • Select theory to justify the level of analysis • Consider NHRD as an emergence-based process and investigate bottom-up effects
HOW principle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What methods are used by researchers to collect data on multilevel NHRD? • What data sources do researchers use to gain insights into multilevel issues? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Too much use of static, cross-sectional designs • Many studies utilize qualitative methods and do not effectively combine qualitative and quantitative methods • A large number of descriptive investigations • Insufficient attention to collecting data from the full array of NHRD actors and stakeholders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct studies that use mixed methods to capture the complexity of different levels of analysis • Use innovative research methods to capture bottom-up elements of context • Focus on getting data from a vertical slice of actors across levels • Make greater use of documents and policy analysis and tap into published databases that can be used for theorizing • Go beyond the traditional interview method
WHERE principle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What countries, regions, and communities are investigated in NHRD research? • What regions of the world are over- or underrepresented in current research? • What type of comparative analysis is undertaken? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lots of country-specific investigations but few comparative studies • Few studies focus on communities and regions • Greater focus on underdeveloped rather than developed countries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct more comparative investigations • Conduct deep and rich studies of regions and communities • Make comparisons between developed and developing countries. • Implement large-scale research projects that span nations and regions

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued).

Key issue	Definition	Key gaps	Future research opportunities
WHEN principle	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• When do researchers collect data on the processes and outcomes of NHRD?• What is the use of longitudinal research designs?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• An abundance of studies utilize one measurement time point• Very few insights concerning the dynamics or temporality of NHRD over time	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Outcomes of NHRD take time to accrue so conduct longitudinal investigations• Achieve greater understanding of the temporal dynamics of NHRD• Utilize strong theoretical justifications for the timing of data collection• Conduct larger-scale cross-country longitudinal investigations
Why principle	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How is NHRD theoretically underpinned at multiple levels?• How appropriate are the selected theories to justify and explain multilevel phenomena?• Are the theories used to fit the conceptualization of NHRD appropriate?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Strong reliance on a small number of mainstream theories• Researchers use different conceptualizations of NHRD• Major emphasis on the use of open-systems models	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Carefully select theories to justify multilevel investigation• Extend the use of existing theories and make greater use of other mainstream theories such as RDT, RBV ST, and IT• Use theories that can potentially demonstrate causality and that are appropriate to explain the longitudinal impact of NHRD• Utilize theories that fit with an emergence-based perspective on NHRD

include the following: How do cross-cultural differences impact the legitimization of NHRD approaches in specific countries? How does the global context and global economic uncertainty influence the priority given to NHRD in individual countries? Is there evidence of divergence or convergence in how countries approach NHRD and what macro-level factors are driving divergence and convergence? How do macro-level conditions such as labour migration and global talent flows influence country approaches to NHRD? A notable gap in the literature concerns the investigation of both formal and informal institutional characteristics and their implications for meso-level NHRD approaches.

While we found an abundance of topics that researchers have engaged with at the meso level, there remain many unanswered questions. Examples of priority questions include the following: What are the roles of different meso-level NHRD actors in the policy formulation process? Are there different combinations of NHRD policies required at different levels, country, region, community, and city? What is the unique role of trade unions and employer associations in NHRD policymaking and implementation? How does the instability of political leaders influence NHRD? How does stakeholder engagement influence the fit, quality, and effectiveness of NHRD policies? How are NHRD policies linked to different stages of economic development and what unique NHRD issues arise at each stage? In terms of cross-level questions, researchers can investigate the following: How do policymakers secure the support of micro-level stakeholders and sustain that support for particular policy approaches and/or NHRD policies? What are the linkages and interactions between meso and micro levels and how do they influence NHRD?

In terms of utilizing emergence-based approaches to the study of NHRD, researchers have scope to investigate the following: What are the challenges in implementing NHRD policies and strategies? How do micro-level actors facilitate or inhibit meso-level actors? How do stakeholders at micro and meso levels construct the outcomes of NHRD? What roles do power dynamics ideology and social relationships of NHRD actors at micro and meso levels play in NHRD implementation? How do micro-level implementation actors interact with meso-level NHRD policymakers and influence their decision-making processes? How does the embeddedness and presence of micro-level NHRD actors within meso-level social and political groups influence NHRD policy formulation and implementation? How do individual NHRD actors interact with and manage meso-level institutions and contradictions? Overall, we suggest that there is a need to continue to investigate the top-down influences of a country's context as well as the bottom-up emergence of NHRD phenomenon.

Guideline 1: Future research should formulate research questions that require cross-level analysis and utilize emergence-based approaches investigating so as to gain a more nuanced and deep understanding of NHRD.

4.2. The HOW of multilevel NHRD research

The second component of our framework concerns how researchers investigate NHRD phenomena. It is essentially an issue of the use of methods and data sources and their combination to investigate research questions from a multilevel perspective.

4.2.1. Current applications and key findings on the HOW principle

There are a number of important characteristics of the existing research that will act as an impediment to multilevel research. First, the field is characterized by a significant number of theoretical contributions (42) reflecting the pioneering works of Harbison and Myers (1964) and McLean (2004). Of the 150 empirical studies, 66% are qualitative, case study descriptive-type investigations. We found that 19% are quantitative-type investigations, while 15% combine both methodologies. Qualitative investigations primarily rely on the use of interviews, observation, and secondary data. We also found that scholars have a strong reliance on using single sources of data and an emphasis on policymakers or the beneficiaries of NHRD. In addition, we found much less use of surveys and questionnaires and the analysis of internal documents, website content, institutional archives, and data bases. The field does, however, provide examples of the creative use of research methods and data sources. Examples include Guerrazzi (2016) who used publically available data gathered through a large-scale survey to explore the impact of vocational training on industry productivity. Wedchayanon and Chorkaew (2014) effectively combined data from documents, interviews, and conservation to examine a major HRD policy initiative in Thailand. Finally, Gedro and Hartman (2015) conducted a qualitative case study of NHRD in Haiti, involving the very effective use of participant observation combined with the content analysis of policy documents. In terms of the use of data sources, Berg et al. (2016) used matching data sets from establishments and employees to investigate the impact of training on the retirement of male and female employees in Germany. In another innovative study, Doerr et al. (2016) examined the impact of national training vouchers on employment using data from administrative data for all vouchers in Germany and actual programme participation data. In another example, Dessie and Ademe (2017) used data from owners, employees, and national vocational training experts to understand the impact of training on Small Medium Enterprise creativity.

4.2.2. Directions and guidelines related to the HOW principle

The investigation of NHRD from a multilevel perspective requires the use of research methods that provide rich descriptions and that effectively capture the multiple layers of context. To this end, the use of qualitative methods represents a good fit with the current state of development within the field (i.e. the need for theory-building contributions) and provides more nuanced understanding of the dynamics and interplay of multiple levels of context. The most significant gains may be derived from the use of multi-method studies, which can enhance the robustness of study findings and contribution to theory building. We suggest the use of more novel research methods including participant observation studies, the analysis of policy documents, ethnographic studies, event studies, economic modelling studies, cost-benefit analysis studies, ground theory approaches, and critical discourse analysis. There is, however, a place for quantitative approaches, for example, when public data are available for testing theory-generated hypotheses at different levels of analysis. Where researchers use quantitative approaches, there should be efforts made to conduct larger-scale studies that involve several countries and teams of researchers. The generation of rich data requires researchers to tap into multiple data sources. Therefore, researchers should be concerned to ensure source as well as method triangulation. Data gathered from multiple stakeholders will significantly enhance the richness of the data available for analysis. Also, there is a particular need to understand how different

stakeholders evaluate NHRD. Relevant stakeholders include the state, employers, labour market participants, the media, interest groups, and MNCs.

Guideline 2: Future NHRD research should more effectively combine qualitative and quantitative methodologies and use multiple data sources to theorize and explain NHRD phenomena at macro, meso, and micro levels.

4.3. The WHERE of multilevel NHRD research

The WHERE principle concerns the countries, regions, and geographies in which researchers investigate NHRD. Who are the dominant countries investigated and how representative are they of the trend of economic development worldwide?

4.3.1. Current applications and key findings on the WHERE principle

Much of the research on NHRD originated from outside the USA. There is strong representation of Asian countries with a paucity of research related to BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) and CIVETS (Columbia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Egypt, Turkey, and South Africa) countries. There is an abundance of single-country studies and more than 50 countries having received research attention including Ghana (Arthur-Mensah and Alagaraja 2013), Oman (Budhwar, Al-Yahmadi, and Debrah 2002), South Korea (Cho and McLean 2004), Singapore (Ashton 2002), and Morocco (Cox, Al Arkoubi, and Estrada 2006). Examples of developed countries researched included Norway (Skule, Stuart, and Nyen 2002), Spain (Martínez Lucio and Stuart 2003), Austria (Lehner and Dikany 2003), Ireland (Heraty and Collings 2006) and New Zealand (Pio 2007), Spain (Rigby and Ponce Sanz 2016), and Russia (Travkin and Sharunina 2016). We found examples of interesting more micro-level-based studies that have focused on regions and communities. Examples include the Ismaili community development in Minnesota (Budhwani and McLean 2012), the Busan Metropolitan City (Ahn and Mclean 2006), and the development of village, neighbourhood, community, and city educational systems (McLean 2006) and regional communities in Korea (Byun and Ryu 2012). There is evidence of an upward trend in research that compares countries. Some recent examples include a study by Borghans, Weel, and Weinberg (2014) who examined the impact of the development of people's skills on labour market outcomes in Britain, Germany, and the USA. Wang (2012) analysed the role of HRD in promoting social entrepreneurship in India and China. Alagaraja and Wang (2012) traced the evolution of NHRD in two emerging economies – China and India. In another example, Oh et al. (2017) used global human resource competitiveness data to compare HRD approaches in the BRICS countries.

4.3.2. Directions and guidelines related to the WHERE principle

With respect to where research on NHRD is undertaken, there is a significant scope to extend the countries investigated, the combination of countries included in studies, and the investigation of countries with a greater diversity of development conditions. There is also a need to continue comparative studies that tease out the role of institutional structures in shaping NHRD policies and practices. Large-scale comparative investigations like those conducted in the HRM field such as The Cranet Study are difficult to conduct and require

collaborations with authors in countries that have yet to be examined. These comparative large-scale studies require large research teams from multiple countries and agreement on the issues to be investigated. When researchers come from different cultural backgrounds, this will require agreement on core concepts which may prove difficult due to cultural nuances and differences. However, if well designed, this type of collaborative research has the potential to generate rich data that can aid comparative analysis.

Guideline 3: Future NHRD research should investigate NHRD in a comparative way using strong theoretical justifications and seek out countries that have not been investigated to date.

4.4. The WHEN of multilevel NHRD research

The WHEN principle centres on the timing of data gathering and the extent to which time or temporality is accounted for in research designs.

4.4.1. Current applications and key findings on the WHEN principle

Time is important in understanding the impact of NHRD; yet time is rarely considered in the current literature. The impacts of NHRD will vary depending on the point in time when the impacts of specific NHRD strategies accrue. Researchers should account for time lags between policy implementation and its impacts. Longitudinal investigations are the exception rather than the norm. We could identify only four studies that met the criteria to be called longitudinal. The overuse of cross-sectional designs does not effectively capture the complexity and dynamism of NHRD. There is evidence that the use of longitudinal data is on the rise. For example, a recent study by Travkin and Sharunina (2016) used panel data to examine returns on investment in HRD in Russia.

4.4.2. Directions and guidelines related to the WHEN principle

Longitudinal designs are particularly important for multilevel research, especially where quantitative designs are used and the research objectives involve investigation of mediators and moderators. Longitudinal research is an essential requirement where the focus is on the investigation of temporality in respect of NHRD phenomena. Time is a complex concept for researchers because it is unidirectional and therefore the same situation is unlikely to repeat itself. Longitudinal research designs are worthwhile because they can offer a fuller picture of the dynamic nature and influence of NHRD. It is likely that particular outcomes related to NHRD may accrue quickly, whereas a significant number of the outcomes highlighted in the literature will take a longer period of time to be realized. In addition, certain outcomes may change over time, and the performance impacts of NHRD may decay, reverse, or accelerate over time. These time-related dimensions of NHRD are not well understood. If researchers conduct multilevel research, they need high-quality longitudinal multilevel data sets. Previous studies typically use individual perceptual reports on higher-level phenomena; however, this type of data may not be particularly useful. If no other option is available, researchers should ensure that they capture multilevel data in survey.

Multilevel research designs are enhanced through the use of novel research methods in a longitudinal way including participant observation, the analysis of NHRD policy

documents, ethnographic and event studies, economic modelling, cost–benefit analysis studies, grounded theory, and critical discourse approaches (Schiffrin, Tanner, and Hamilton 2008). These methods help researchers to unpack the perspectives of multiple actors and reduce the imbalance in the literature where several actor voices are absent.

Guideline 4: Future research should focus on the impact of multilevel conceptualizations of NHRD over time to capture temporal and dynamic effects and understand temporal ordering in respect of how outcomes evolve over time.

4.5. The WHY of multilevel NHRD research

The WHY principle addresses the specific theories that are used to investigate research questions. We also focused on the use of conceptual models within the field.

4.5.1. Current applications and key findings on the WHY principle

We found that scholars have, to date, utilized a relatively narrow but appropriate set of theoretical perspectives including economic development theory (Wang 2008), national development theory (Briggs 1987; Wang and Swanson 2008), international development theory (Cox, Al Arkoubi, and Estrada 2006), and culture and history (Cunningham, Lynham, and Weatherly 2006). Theories that are less frequently used include institutional theory (Murphy and Garavan 2009), national HRM systems theory (Edwards and Kuruvilla 2005), stakeholder theory (Baek and Kim 2014), and national innovation systems theory (Oh, Choi, and Choi 2013a).

A second dimension of the WHY question concerns the use of conceptual models to capture the social, cultural, economic, political, and educational characteristics of a specific country or countries. These models highlight open systems approaches and include Ahn and McLean's (2006) three generic NHRD models: (a) a labour model, (b) an education model, and (c) a balanced model emphasizing innovation and education. They also include Alagaraja and Wang's (2012) education-led systems model and Baek and Kim (2014) stakeholder-based model. A third dimension of the WHY question concerns conceptualizations of NHRD. Examples include: (a) a set of planned and coordinated actions to enhance human capital and contribute to both social and economic outcomes (Kim 2012b; McLean 2004); (b) a public policy framework formulated by multiple stakeholders including national governments (Alagaraja and Wang 2012), regional actors (Paprock 2006), and organizations engaged in international development (Wang and McLean 2007); (c) actions focused on enhancing the abilities, knowledge, and skill and physical and psychological well-being of human resources (Russ-Eft et al. 2014); (d) a set of policy interventions and strategies including general education (Oh, Choi, and Choi 2013), on the job development (Rao 2006), active labour market programmes (Gloss et al. 2014), vocational education and training interventions (McLean et al. 2008), multi-sector partnerships (Hopkins, Lawrence, and Webster 2014), and community-based skill and development interventions (Lawrence and Stevens 1988); and (e) a combination of top-down and bottom-up interventions emphasizing human agency and resourcefulness (Lawrence, Thompson, and Gloss 2014).

4.5.2. *Directions and guidelines related to the WHY principle*

Multilevel conceptualizations of NHRD require strong theoretical underpinnings and the use of theory that is appropriate to the level of analysis and whether the multilevel approach is top-down or bottom-up. Scholars should seek theoretical explanations beyond the mother disciplines and engage with theories from sociology, institutional theory, and politics. Researchers should, however, start with a very clear statement of the NHRD phenomenon of interest and then carefully tease out the theories that are relevant and identify the levels the theories at. Multilevel investigations should be based on theories that are a good fit with what is being investigated. Hitt, Ireland, and Hoskisson (2007) emphasized the importance for researchers to carefully articulate the theoretical basis for both top-down and bottom-up investigations. The theories we discuss below are selective due to space limitations.

Institutional theory is particularly suitable to investigate both top-down and bottom-up multilevel theorizing on NHRD that we proposed as part of principle 1. For example, this theory helps explain how NHRD with individual countries is impacted by macro and meso institutional-level factors and the role of government policy and regulations (Nam et al. 2014). Scholars might also consider the use of a neoinstitutional perspective on how NHRD stakeholders respond to new NHRD rules and regulations and how they are interpreted. Institutional anomie theory, a particular variant of institutional theory (Cullen, Johnson, and Parboteeah 2013), helps scholars understand top-down influences because of its emphasis on the importance of social stratification that can impact NHRD effectiveness. This theory highlights the importance of cultural values and their interaction with social institutions. These institutional theories are useful in explaining variations in approaches to NHRD and issues of divergence and convergence. The use of institutional theory inevitably requires the selection of longitudinal designs that we propose as part of principle 4.

Stakeholder theory focuses on identifying NHRD actors and their goals (Freeman, Wick, and Parmar 2004). NHRD is part of a political-economic system of stakeholders who interact to influence policies and strategies. Each NHRD actor has a role in defining the framework of policymaking and implementation. Resource dependency theory explains how NHRD can help reduce dependencies due to country, region, or city or community dependency on external agencies or resources, thus reducing environmental dependency. This theory is useful to explain how the value of the resources developed through NHRD is contingent upon power relationships and resource dependencies between NHRD stakeholders. NHRD may confer political resources or advantages, and given that governments are one of the most complex and difficult dependencies to control (Hillman, Withers, and Collins 2009), NHRD actors may engage in co-option strategies to reduce resource dependencies. Open systems theory offers major potential to NHRD to examine multilevel issues. It is particularly appropriate to our framework because it emphasizes 'wholeness' where systems work in totality rather than in terms of their individual parts (Van Bertalanffy 1968). Therefore, the different levels of the framework can be conceptualized as sub-systems and their synergistic interactions lead to outcomes. Systems theory also emphasizes feedback loops, and consequently, the outcomes of NHRD produce resources that impact future NHRD inputs (Katz and Rozenzweig 1972). Taking these theoretical approaches requires the collection of data from different sources as well as the use of multiple methods that we suggested in principle 3.

The investigation of emergence-based perspectives on NHRD can be enhanced through the use of some less mainstream theories. For example, social embeddedness theory (Granovetter 1985; Uzzi 1999) suggests that the actions of individual NHRD actors are embedded in social relations, and as a consequence, actors will be more loyal to both social and political groups to which they are closely linked. Therefore, NHRD actors with strong ties to government decision-makers may take precedence over demands made by other stakeholders. Second, social capital theories (Rawls 1971) can help NHRD researchers investigate how the strength of the social contract between a community and its citizens helps legitimize particular NHRD interventions, outcomes, and evaluation approaches, and how they impact national-level strategy and approaches. Third, we suggest that Habermasian theories (Frynas and Stephens 2015) can be used to understand how NHRD actors socially construct NHRD systems, policies, and outcomes in different institutional contexts.

Guideline 5: Future multilevel NHRD research should clearly define the construct under investigation and select the theory appropriate to the level of analysis, including combining theories to best study multiple levels.

Table 2 summarizes the key levels of analysis and provides suggestions for researchers.

5. Conclusions

Drawing on 47 years of research, we found evidence of major growth in the field. Nevertheless, the field is nascent in terms of multilevel theorizing and investigations. There is significant scope to apply the five principles and corresponding guidelines in future research on NHRD. We acknowledge that this review is subject to a number of limitations of which researchers should be aware. First, we only included articles published in peer-reviewed journals. Therefore, our sample is incomplete in that we excluded conference papers, books, monographs, and other non-published materials. Second, we only included English-language publications in our review. Given our subject area, this represents a significant limitation because it is highly likely that scholarly articles have been published in other languages. We do, however, observe the hegemony of English as a language within the wider HRD field. Finally, we confined our recommendations to five key principles and guidelines. We did this in the interest of parsimony but acknowledge scope to suggest additional principles and guidelines. Overall, we make three contributions to NHRD scholarship. First, we take stock of the NHRD literature and identify the topics and issues that researchers have investigated at macro, meso, and micro levels of analysis. We have also highlighted key trends in the use of research methods, data sources, study locations, study time frames, and guiding theories. Second, we propose five principles that researchers should follow to undertake multilevel NHRD research. Third, we suggest theoretical enhancements that have value to multilevel conceptualizations of NHRD and thus will advance the field of HRD as a whole.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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